

Increasing Learning Transfer Amongst Newly Trained Employees: The Role of the Supervisor

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Abstract: This paper addresses the issue of learning or training transfer by studying the role of the supervisor in five organizations, focusing on transfer strategies and identifying successful and unsuccessful transfer situations.

The 20th century phenomena of the “Global Village” has increased overall competition between companies to never-before imagined levels. It has created a need to acquire new knowledge and competencies, which is further enhanced due to the rapid pace of technological advances and market forces that are constantly changing, to say the least. In 1997, organizations with more than 100 employees were estimated to have spent \$58.6 billion in direct costs on formal training. However, the rate of transfer of these new skills and knowledge has been estimated at between 10% (Georgensen, 1982) to 40% (Broad & Newstrom, 1992). The aim of this paper is to examine the factors that can influence learning or training transfer, and strategies that a supervisor can utilize, with his newly-trained employees, to maximize training transfer transforming it from an expense to an investment with a long-term dividend stream.

What is Learning Transfer?

Most authors agree that the transfer of learning is in its essence a form of generalization and application to situations outside of the training one. Thus, transfer of learning is considered as the generalization of the skills acquired during the training phase to the work environment and the maintenance of these acquired skills over time (Baldwin and Ford, 1988; Taylor 1997) defines transfer of learning in the workplace “as the effective application, by trainees, to their jobs of the knowledge and skills gained as a result of attending an educational program ”(p. 1). In addition, Broad (1997) defines it as the constant and effective application of knowledge and abilities acquired by the trainee during training activities, in the context of the execution of tasks which are part of their individual, organizational or community responsibilities. Learning transfer can be considered synonymous to **learning transfer**, however, the former occurs in a work setting. Since this study took place in such an environment, the expression "training transfer" will be used in this text.

Factors That Influence Learning Transfer

Learning transfer can be influenced by many factors that can facilitate or hinder it. These factors can be classified in two main categories, depending on whether they are related to the trainee or to the environment. Trainee-related factors can be divided into two sub-categories: motivation or ability-related. Motivation-related factors can be the perceived relevance of training, the choice in attending training, outcome expectancies, self-efficacy, job involvement, job motivation and perceived control. Ability-related factors are knowledge acquisition, situation identification or foundational knowledge or experience. Environment related factors can be divided into two sub-categories: job or organization-related. A job-related factor can be the job requirements, timing of the opportunity, norms and group pressure, contextual similarity, supervisory support and interference from the job. Organizational-related factors can be a reward system as a means of positive reinforcement or the organizational culture and climate.

Training Transfer Strategies

Broad and Newstrom (1992) have identified three key players who can influence the training transfer process: trainer, trainee, and manager. However, the supervisor has been identified as the key participant / player in training transfer by Taylor (1997) and Branderhorst & Wognum (1995). In addition, training transfer inhibitors can occur at any time during the training cycle,

meaning before, during or after training occurs, hence, measures to counter them must be applied at those same times. Training transfer strategies that can be utilized before training occurs can be: needs assessment; training design; selection criteria; sending co-working to training together; knowledge content; meeting between supervisor and trainee; publicizing past training successes; expected performance level; signature of agreement; trainees' knowledge transfer; timing and location; schedule training; problem-resolution meetings; pre-course supervisory involvement and obtaining coaching skills. Training transfer strategies that can be utilized during training can be: preventing interruptions; working coverage; supervisory participation; application opportunities; longer-term training; recognizing trainee participation and relevant sessions. Training transfer strategies that can be utilized after training can be: debriefing with trainer; meeting with trainee; providing opportunities to practice new skills; role modeling; positive reinforcement; celebrating small wins; mentor partnership training; reducing job pressures; new ideas and experimentation; responsibility for work; trainees' knowledge transfer; peer support meetings; brown-bag dialogues; refresher courses; tools and equipment and sharing ideas. Because of his strategic influence, the strategies listed below will be destined for supervisor, who can utilize them throughout the training cycle. What are the factors that can influence **learning transfer** and strategies that a supervisor can utilize, with his newly-trained employees; to maximize training transfer is the question that guided us in our study.

Method

Building on the literature on **learning transfer**, we developed an interview questionnaire that we pre-tested. It was used to interview 34 employees and 14 supervisors in 5 important organizations in Quebec. We analyzed the contents using the interview transcripts and specific inductive grids developed for this purpose.

Results of the Field Interviews' Analysis

We now present the main results of our analysis pertaining to obstacles to transfer, supervisor's involvement, and reasons for successful/unsuccessful transfer. Lastly, we provide some suggestions for future training activities.

Obstacles to the Supervisor's Role as Training Transfer Agent

Supervisors were asked if they saw any obstacles to their role, responsibilities, interventions or their implications, in either a soft or technical-skill training context. Out of 11 responses, 6 pertained to a lack of time due to business deadlines or trainees' multiple responsibilities. When asked for their methods to circumvent this obstacle, supervisors could not offer any clear and straightforward solution. They felt hopeless in the face of strict business deadlines or trainees' ever increasing workloads; both of which hinder the allocation of sufficient time to training and its transfer.

Supervisor's Actual Involvement in Trainee's Training Transfer

Both supervisors and their employees were asked the same question: what was the supervisor's actual involvement in their own or their employee's training transfer, in both a soft and technical-skill context? All interviewees indicated, overwhelmingly, that the supervisor's involvement occurred after training had taken place (between 74% and 85%). In a soft-skill context, supervisors mentioned that their involvement took the form of coaching sessions with the trainee. One supervisor used an alternative approach to the traditional coaching method: he organized "coaching couples" between peers. Two colleagues, who had followed the same training, would coach each other. Not only was this beneficial to training transfer as peer influence is a job-related factor of transfer, but it allowed the supervisor to "duplicate" his or her role. A second supervisor organized "trainee loans," which encompassed both training transfer and career development benefits. A trainee, following training, was "loaned" to another

department in order to be able to apply what he had just learned. Training transfer benefits were achieved, as well as career development because it gave the trainee a broader vision of work processes and their different stages. In a technical-skill context, the majority of supervisors created opportunities to practice and apply newly-learned skills and knowledge. In one response, a third-party was identified, which was not found in soft-skill training: the technical expert. Supervisors felt that, due to a lack of knowledge, they were not able to support their employees in applying course content. Hence, they relied on a technical expert to answer employees' questions. A total of 28 responses received from employees indicated that, in a soft-skill context, creating opportunities to practice and apply newly-learned skills and knowledge, and coaching were the two most common methods of after-training involvement by their supervisor. In a technical-skill training context, employees confirmed that the creation of application opportunities was the most common method of involvement for their supervisors.

Reasons for Successful / Unsuccessful Transfer Situations

Supervisors were also asked to recall successful / unsuccessful situations where training transfer occurred or did not occur, and the reasons behind the success or failure.

Successful Transfer Situations

Successes varied greatly: from public speaking to technical calculations training. They were also equally divided between soft and technical-skill training. Concerning the reasons for the successful transfer situations, a total of 27 responses were obtained, which can be grouped in 3 categories: coaching or other forms of follow-up; motivation; and cascade effect.

Coaching or other forms of follow-up: 7 responses related to either formal coaching sessions or transfer workshops where the training topic and its application was discussed, or informal sessions through general and regular individual or team monthly meetings. The main idea behind this exercise was to remind trainees of the training topic and its application, decreasing the probability that it would be forgotten and its application delayed. These reasons are in fact training transfer strategies. These strategies can have an impact on motivation-related factors like self-efficacy and job-related factors such as supervisory support.

Motivation: A total of 4 responses were obtained that affected the motivation of the trainees. They either saw the advantages of the training (learned a new and efficient method) or the new skills were immediately applied to a real project, which had visibility and was then presented to upper management. This is directly related to the perceived relevance of training as a motivation-related factors as explained by Elangovan & Karakowsky (1999) and Geroy & Penna (1995). It is also important for trainees to understand the reasons behind the training: what prompted the deployment of a particular course? By understanding this, the likelihood that trainees will be motivated to learn and then motivated to transfer will increase, as explained by Kontoghiorghes (2001).

Cascade effect: Although only 2 responses related to this topic, they are considered innovative, and merit discussion. In both instances, a senior team member attended training and later taught the same training to other team members. This cascade effect has 2 benefits: junior trainees, knowing that their supervisors have followed the same training and are teaching it, will increase their adherence to the training effort and their motivation to learn, hence improving, the likelihood of training transfer (Kontoghiorghes, 2001). The supervisors, having experienced the same training exercise, will realize the complexity of the content and will be in a better position to empathize, transmit and coach skills and knowledge. It is worth mentioning that only 1 supervisor listed several interventions that exemplified his involvement from the start to the end of the training process: he was involved in course development, prepared trainees, identified needs, made sure that content reflected needs, and obtained support from an internal consultant,

all of which increased trainee motivation and the trust they had in their supervisor in this context. These reasons for the success are in fact training transfer strategies in all three scenarios: before, during and after training took place.

Unsuccessful Transfer Situations

Learning from mistakes can be a constructive exercise. Hence, we asked supervisors to describe situations where training transfer did not occur and the reasons behind them. Again, the situations varied widely and half of all situations related to technical-skill training, the other half relating to soft-skill training. The 14 responses obtained indicated a variety of reasons for the failure, from an inadequate trainer to a lack of supervisory follow-up. This latter reason is in fact a job-related factor to transfer as explained by Elangovan & Karakowsky (1999) and Laroche & Haccoun (1999). Of these, 6 were related to the link between training and trainees' work reality. In fact, either course content or examples used were not tied-in to their reality, or there were no job application possibilities for what was learned. These reasons are job-related factors, notably job requirements (Elangovan & Karakowsky, 1999; Geroy & Penna, 1995; Laroche & Haccoun, 1999) and contextual similarity (Elangovan & Karakowsky, 1999). This could indicate that the course developer was not made aware of the work context of the trainees, or the relevance for taking a course was not established, thus having no real application or transfer opportunities. It is very important that the course developer (who is very often the trainer) knows the trainees work reality and their context in order to develop appropriate course content and deliver training in the most convivial and effective manner possible. Two responses pertained to a lack of adherence, from the trainees to upper management, to the training effort. In the first situation, the direct supervisor was not involved in the development of the course; albeit, they were the ones that would promote the application of the training at the trainee level. Without their daily influence, the course was not promoted, nor efforts encouraged. In the second situation, top management did not fully endorse and support a new performance evaluation process, and the course that was used to teach this new process. Trainees felt this lack of support and, in turn, they did not adhere to the entire effort/process. Hence, it is important that all participants, from upper management to trainees, endorse and adhere to the training effort in order for it to be a success. As indicated by Newstrom, lack of active support from the organization, which, in this case means direct supervisors and upper management, is the third most important barrier to transfer as it is an organization-related factor that can influence training transfer (1986).

Suggestions for Future Training Activities

Hindsight being 20/20, supervisors were then asked what they would change for future training activities. A total of 23 responses were obtained which can be divided into three categories: pedagogical design/content; coaching and feedback; and involvement.

Pedagogical design/content: Eight of the responses pertained to this subject. In fact, they mentioned that more examples/scenarios should be included in course content. But, they also indicated that these examples should be directly related to trainees' reality. Because there is similarity between the training context and their work reality, this will increase the likelihood that transfer will occur (Elangovan & Karakowsky, 1999). In addition, a simplicity factor was suggested. In fact, content should be kept to a strict minimum, focusing on the essential, thus avoiding clutter that could inhibit comprehension. It was also indicated that it is preferable to have several, short training sessions than a continuous, long-term session (e.g. 4 half-day sessions spread over several weeks instead of 2 full, continuous days). This way, it is easier for the trainee to assimilate and apply a smaller quantity of skills/knowledge before moving on to new concepts.

Coaching and feedback: On four occasions, supervisors indicated that, in the future, they would organize regular meetings to discuss course application and difficulties encountered. One

supervisor had an innovative approach: he would make sure that coaches received training in coaching techniques. This is seldom mentioned, and very often taken for granted. This is essential to increase the likelihood that coaching will be done properly and effectively.

Involvement: The involvement of direct supervisors and upper management was pointed-out as critical to the success of future training. Direct supervisors are the individuals that, on a daily basis, offer support and guidance to employees, hence directly promote training transfer. Upper management buy-in is essential as it gives direction to the actions of lower echelons, in addition to sending a very clear signal as to what must be implemented. These two groups of individuals represent the organizational culture and climate, which is an organization-related factor that can have an impact on training transfer.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our study shows that **learning transfer** can be facilitated or hindered by many actors, and that supervisors, using training transfer strategies, can play a major role in their employees' training transfer. As we can see from the results, for both supervisors and employees, coaching (by supervisor or peer) as well as the creation of opportunities to apply are the common themes for supervisors' actual involvement, in both soft and technical-skill training contexts. The main reasons for successful transfer pertained to coaching (or other forms of follow-up), trainees' motivation, and the cascade effect of senior team members attending training and teaching the same training later on. The main reasons behind unsuccessful transfer situations were related to a lack of link between training and trainees' work reality, as well as a lack of adherence, from the trainees to upper management, to the training effort. Finally, the 23 responses received when asked for suggestions for future training activities could be divided between improving pedagogical design/content of courses, increasing the quantity and quality of coaching and feedback received, and lastly the involvement of direct supervisors and upper management in any training endeavour.

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